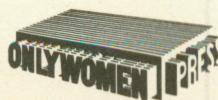


**THE HANG-GLIDER'S
DAUGHTER**

New and Selected Poems

Marilyn Hacker



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from **TAKING NOTICE**

THE HANG-GLIDER'S DAUGHTER

for Catherine Logan

My forty-year old father learned to fly.
Bat-winged, with a magic marble fear
keeping his toast down, he walks off a sheer
shaved cliff into the morning. On Sunday
mornings he comes for us. Liane and I
feed the baby and Mario, wash up, clear
the kitchen mess. Maman is never there;
that is the morning she and Joseph try
to tell the other pickers how the Word
can save them. Liane gets me good and mad
changing her outfit sixteen times, while I
have to change the baby. All the way
up the hill road she practices on him, flirt-
ing like she does at school. My back teeth hurt

from chewing Pepper Gum on the bad side.
She's three years younger. I'm three years behind.
Did he *mean* that? Shift the gum. Did I remind
Mario, if the baby cries, he needs
burping? I can stretch out on the back seat.
The olive terraces stacked in the sunshine
are shallow stairs a giant child could climb.
My hiking shoes look giant on my feet.
Maman says "a missed boy." What do I miss?
I wonder what the word in English is
for that. Funny, that we should have been born
somewhere we wouldn't even understand
the language now. I was already three
when we left. If someone hypnotized me

would I talk English like a three-year-old?
The bright road twists up; bumpily we shift
gears, breathe deep. In the front pouch of my sweat-
shirt, I've still got my two best marbles. Rolled
in thumb and finger, they click, points gained, told

beads. Not for Joseph's church. If I forgot French, too, who would I be inside my head? My hands remember better: how to hold my penknife to strip branches, where to crack eggs on a bowl rim, how to pile a block tower—when I was little—high as my nose. Could I, still? The box of blocks is Mario's now. My knee's cramped. I wish that I could walk to Dad's house, or that I was up front, talk-

ing to him. How does he feel, suddenly slung from brilliant nylon, levering onto air currents like a thinking hawk? I'd be scared. I'd be so scared I can't think it. Maybe a long slope on my skateboard's like that. Climbing isn't scary: no time. The air's fizzy, you're careful what rock you hang your weight from, and where your toes wedge. My calves ache, after, ribs sting, but I'm good for something. What I like high is mountains. I'll go up the hill behind Dad's house this afternoon. I'll pick Liane flowers. Nahh, we'll be leafing magazines for school clothes on the sun porch after lunch. I like those purple bell-spikes. My cleats crunch

the crumble; I stretch to the ledge and pull out the whole rooted stalk. Sometimes there's twelve bells, purple as—purple as nothing else except a flower, ugly and beautiful at once. Across my face come the two smells: grandmother's linen-chest spice-sweet petals and wet dirt clinging, half meat, half metal, all raw. Between them I smell myself, sweaty from climbing, but it's a woman's sweat. I had one of the moon dreams again. I stood on the flyover facing purple sea, head up, while a house-huge full moon hurtled toward me; then it was me flying, feet still on the road. We're here, on top of the hill.

TO IVA, TWO-AND-A-HALF

Little fat baby, as we
don't run the world, I
wince that I can't
drive a car or a truck, ice-
skate, build shelves and
tables, ride
you up five flights of
stairs on my shoulders.
I notice you noticing
who rides most of the Big
Motorcycles, drives buses,
stacks grocery cartons, makes
loud big holes in the street.
"Mustn't hit little girls!" meaning
you, though who'd
know if we didn't say so!
Soon they'll be telling you
you can't be
Batman, Shakespeare, President, or God.
Little fat baby, going on
schoolgirl, you can be
anyone, but it won't be
easy.

PRAYER FOR MY DAUGHTER

You'll be
coming home alone on the AA
Local from Canal St., 1 A.M.
Two black girls, sixteen, bushy
in plaid wood jackets, fiddle
with a huge transistor radio.
A stout bespectacled white woman reads
Novy Mir
poking at a grey braid.
A thin blue blonde dozes on shopping bags.
Tobacco-colored, hatchet-faced and square,
another mumbles in her leather collar.
Three sharp Latinas jive round the center-post,
 bouncing
a pig-tailed baby, tiny sparkling
earrings, tiny work overalls.
A scrubbed corduroy girl wearing a slide-rule eyes
a Broadway redhead wearing green fingernails.
A huge-breasted drunk, vines
splayed on cheeks, inventively
slangs the bored brown
woman in a cop suit, strolling.
You'll get out at 81st St. (Planetarium)
and lope upstairs, travelling light-years.
The war is over!

1976

The bathroom tiles are very pink and new.
Out the window, a sixty-foot willow
tree forks, droops. Planted eighteen years ago,
its huge roots choke the drains. The very blue
sky is impenetrable. I hear you
whine outside the locked door. You're going to cry.
If I open the door, I'll slap you. I've
hit you six times this morning. I threw
you on the rug and smacked your bottom. Slapped
your face. Slapped your hands. I sit on the floor.
We're both scared. I picked you up, held you, lov-
ing your cheek's curve. Yelled, shook you. I want to
stop
this day. I cringe on the warm pink tiles of
a strange house. We cry on both sides of the door.

THIRD SNOWFALL

"Take with you also my curly-headed four-year-old child."

Josephine Miles: "Ten Dreamers in a Motel"

Another storm, another blizzard
soaks the shanks and chills the gizzard.
Indoors, volumned to try a Stoic, a
four-year-old plays the *Eroica*
three times through. Young Ludwig's ears?
No, only an engineer's
delight in Running the Machine.
Pop! Silence? "I was just seein'
if I could make the tape run back."
"Don't." "If the knob is on 8-track
and I put on a record, what
happens? . . . It's turning, but it's not
playing." "That's what happens." "Oh.
Which dial is for the radio?
I'm going to jump up on your back!
Swing me around!" A subtle *crack*
and not-so-subtle knives-in-spine.
"Get down, my back's gone out! Don't whine

about it, I'm the one that's hurt."
"I'm sorry . . . Did I have dessert?
What's water made of? Can it melt?"
(I know how Clytemnestra felt.)
"I want a cookie. What is Greek?
Will I be taller by next week?
Is this the way a vampire growls?
I'm going to dress up in the towels.
Look! I can slide on them like skis!
Hey, I've got dried glue on my knees.
Hey, where are people from? The *first*
ones, I mean. What was the Worst
Thing you Ever Ate?" *Past* eight
at last, I see. "Iva, it's late."
"It's not. I want some jam on bread."
"One slice, then get your ass in bed."
"No, wait until my record's over.
I want my doll. And the Land Rover
for Adventure People. Mom, are
you *listening*? Where's the doll's pajamas?
There's glue or something in my hair.
Can I sleep in my underwear?
I think I need the toy fire-fighter
guy too . . . I'm thirsty . . ." *und so weiter.*

LA FONTAINE DE VAUCLUSE

for Marie Ponsot

"Why write unless you praise the sacred places . . .?"

Richard Howard: "Audiences"

1

Azure striation swirls beyond the stones
flung in by French papas and German boys.
The radio-guide emits trilingual noise.
"Always 'two ladies alone'; we were not alone."
Source, cunt, umbilicus, resilient blue
springs where the sheer gorge spreads wooded,
mossed thighs:
unsounded female depth in a child-sized
pool boys throw rocks at. Hobbled in platform shoes,
girls stare from the edge. We came for the day
on a hot bus from Avignon. A Swed-
ish child hurls a chalk boulder; a tall girl,
his sister, twelve, tanned, crouches to finger shell-
whorls bedded in rock-moss. We find our way
here when we can; we take away what we need.

2

Here, when we can, we take away what we need:
stones, jars of herb-leaves, scrap-patch workbags
stored

in the haphazard rooms we can afford.

Marie and I are lucky: we can feed
our children and ourselves on what we earn.

One left the man who beat her, left hostages
two daughters; one weighs her life to her wages,
finds both wanting and, bought out, stays put, scorn-
ful of herself for not deserving more.

The concierge at Le Régent is forty-six;
there fifteen years, widowed for one, behind
counters a dun perpetual presence, fixed
in sallow non-age till Marie talked to her.

I learn she is coeval with my friends.

3

I learn she is coeval with my friends:
the novelist of seventy who gives
us tea and cakes; the sister with whom she lives
a dialogue; the old Hungarian
countess' potter daughter, British, dyke,
bravely espoused in a medieval hill
town in Provence; Jane whom I probably will
never know and would probably never like;
Liliane the weaver; Liliane's daughter
the weaver; Liliane's housewifely other
daughter, mothering; the great-grandmother
who drove us through gnarled lanes at Avignon;
the virgin at the source with wedgies on;
Iva, who will want to know what I brought her.

4

Iva, who will want to know what I brought her
(from Selfridge's, a double-decker bus,
a taxi, Lego; a dark blue flowered dress
from Uniprix; a wickerwork doll's chair
from the Vence market; books; a wrapped-yarn deer;
a batik: girl guitarist who composes
sea creatures, one of three I chose,
two by the pupil, one by the woman who taught her),
might plunge her arms to the elbows, might shy
stones,
might stay shy. I'll see her in ten days.
Sometimes she still swims at my center; sometimes
she is a four-year-old an ocean away
and I am on vertiginous terrain
where I am nobody's mother and nobody's daughter.

5

"Where I am, nobody's mother and nobody's daughter
can find me," words of a woman in pain
or self-blame, obsessed with an absent or present man,
blindfolded, crossing two swords, her back to the
water.

The truth is, I wake up with lust and loss
and only half believe in something better;
the truth is that I still write twelve-page letters
and blame my acne and my flabby ass
that I am thirty-five and celibate.

Women are lustful and fickle and all alike,
say the hand-laid flower-pressed sheets at the
papermill.

I pay attention to what lies they tell
us here, but at the flowered lip, hesitate,
one of the tamed girls stopped at the edge to look.

6

One of the tame girls stopped at the edge to look
at her self in the water, genital self that stains
and stinks, that is synonymous with drains,
wounds, pettiness, stupidity, rebuke.
The pool creates itself, cleansed, puissant, deep
as magma, maker, genetrix. Marie
and I, each with a notebook on her knee,
begin to write, homage the source calls up
or force we find here. There is another source
consecrate in the pool we perch above:
our own intelligent accord that brings
us to the lucid power of the spring
to work at re-inventing work and love.
We may be learning how to tell the truth.

7

We may be learning how to tell the truth.
Distracted by a cinematic sky,
Paris below two dozen shades of grey,
in borrowed rooms we couldn't afford, we both
work over words till we can tell ourselves
what we saw. I get up at eight, go down
to buy fresh croissants, put a saucepan on
and brew first shared coffee. The water solves
itself, salves us. Sideways, hugging the bank,
two stocky women helped each other, drank
from leathery cupped palms. We make our own
descent downstream, getting our shoes wet, care-
fully hoist cold handfuls from a crevice where
azure striation swirls beyond the stones.

HOME, AND I'VE

Covered the flowered linen
where I graze
on a convolvulus that hides in
lion grass, and ride in-

to the sunrise on a sand
horse. These days
shorten, but the afternoon simmered
me down. I had dinner

alone, with retrospective
on the blaz-
on of your throat's tiger-lily flush
and your salt sap enough

company until tomorrow.
The fat blue
lamp spills on a ziggurat of books,
mug the same cobalt. Looks

like reprise of lesson one
in how to
keep on keeping on. Easier, with
you fixed hours away; both

solitude and company
have a new
savor: yours. Sweet woman, I'll woman-
fully word a nomen-

clature for what we're doing
when we come
to; come to each other with our eyes,
ears, arms, minds, everything wide

open. Your tonic augments
my humdrum
incantations till they work. I can
stop envying the one

whose berth's the lap where I'd like
to roll home
tonight. I've got May's new book for bed,
steak, greens, and wine inside

me, you back tomorrow, some
words, some laz-
y time (prune the plants, hear Mozart) to
indulge in missing you.

PANTOUM

There is a serviceable wooden dory
rocking gently at the lip of ocean,
from where her moorline loops back loosely
to an outrider of the wet forest.

Rocking gently at the lip of ocean,
whorled and rosy carapaces glimmer.
To an outrider of the wet forest
who kneels at the undulant flat belly

whorled and rosy carapaces glimmer
under, the water is a mirror dreaming.
Who kneels at the undulant flat belly
feels her pulse gyre in the liquid circles.

Under the water is a mirror dreaming
furled leaves. She kneads and presses her friend's
spine,
feels her pulse gyre in the liquid circles
her palm oils on smooth skin, opening like

furled leaves. She kneads and presses her friend's
spine,
enters her own blood's tiderush, leaves
her palm oils on smooth skin. Opening like
shrubby parting to bare fingers, she

enters. Her own blood's tiderush leaves
her charged with flammable air, igniting the
shrubby. Parting to bare fingers, she
grows, reaches into the fire licking

her, charged with flammable air, igniting the
dry tinder, and the wet places that flame like brandy.
Grows, reaches into the fire licking
her clean, that nourishes as it consumes

dry tinder. And the wet places that flame like brandy
are knowledgeable. They affirm
her: clean. That nourishes as it consumes
detritus of self-doubt, whispers she fears

are knowledgeable. They affirm
each other in themselves. Still, when the
detritus of self-doubt whispers, she fears
the empty pool, that secret. They could lose

each other in themselves, still. When the
postcards begin arriving, they depict
the empty pool, that secret. They could lose
jobs, balance, money, central words, music.

Postcards begin arriving. They depict
themselves living in a perfect landscape, with
jobs, balance, money: central. Words, music
one made for the other, late at night, as they rocked

themselves. Living in a perfect landscape, with
passionate friends, you'd ache, she thinks.
One made for the other? Late at night, as they rocked
into incognate languages, were they still

passionate friends? You'd ache, she thinks,
if your mind buzzed with translations of denial
into incognate languages. Were they still
anywhere near the hidden rainforest?

If your mind buzzed with translations of denial,
you might not see the gapping in the hedgerows,
anywhere near the hidden rainforest,
a child could push through, or a tall woman stooping.

You might not see the gapping in the hedgerows
at first. She grew up here, points out where
a child could push through, or a tall woman. Stooping,
however many shoulder in, to the brambles

at first. She grew up here, points out where
the path mounts, damp under eye-high ferns.
However many shoulder into the brambles,
each one inhales the solitude of climbing.

The path mounts, damp under eye-high ferns.
Cedars aspire to vanishing point in the sky.
Each one inhales the solitude of climbing
lichenous rocks. In soft perpetual rain,

cedars aspire to vanishing point in the sky,
then, sea-stained and enormous, niched for foothold,
lichenous rocks, in soft perpetual rain.
Each, agile or clumsy, silently scales them.

Then, see: Stained and enormous, niched for foothold
by tidepools sloshing broken shells and driftwood
(each, agile or clumsy, silently scales them
to her own size), boulders embrace the Sound.

By tidepools sloshing broken shells, and driftwood
from where her moorline loops back loosely
to her own sides (boulders embrace the sound
there) is a serviceable wooden dory.

FEELING AND FORM

for Sandy Moore and for Susanne K. Langer

Dear San: Everybody doesn't write poetry.
A lot of people doodle profiles, write
something they think approximates poetry
because nobody taught them to read poetry.
Rhyming or trailing gerunds, clumps of words
straggle a page, unjustified—poetry?
It's not like talking, so it must be poetry.
Before they learn to write, all children draw
pictures grown-ups teach them how not to draw.
Anyone learns/unlearns the craft of poetry
too. The fourth grader who gets a neat like-
ness of Mom in crayon's not unlike

the woman who sent you her Tone Poem, who'd like
her admiration praised. That isn't poetry,
unless she did the work that makes it like
this, any, work, in outrage, love, or lik-
ing an apple's October texture. Write
about anything—I wish I could. It's like
the still-lives you love: you don't have to like
apples to like Cézanne. I do like words,
which is why I make things out of words
and listen to their hints, resounding like
skipping-stones radiating circles, draw-
ing context from text, the way I've watched you draw

a pepper shaker on a table, draw
it again, once more, until it isn't like
anything but your idea of a draw-
ing, like an idea of movement, draw-
ing its shape from sequence. You write poetry.
I was a clever child who liked to draw,
and did it well, but when I watch you draw,
you rubber-face like I do when I write:

chewed lip, cat-tongue, smiles, scowls that go with
right
choices, perplexed, deliberate, withdrawn
in worked play, conscious of the spaces words
or lines make as you make them, without words

for instant exegesis. Molding words
around a shape's analogous to draw-
ing these coffee-cups in settings words
describe, but whose significance leaves words
unsaid, because it's drawn, because it's like
not my blue mug, but inked lines. Chosen words
—I couldn't write *your white mug*—collect words
they're meant, or drawn to, make mental space poetry
extends beyond the page. If you thought poetry
were merely nicely ordered private words
for two eyes only, why would you say, "Write
me a letter, dammit!" This is a letter, right?

Wrong. Form intimates fiction. I could write
me as a mathematician, weave in words
implying *you* a man, sixteen, a right-
handed abstract expressionist. I'd write
untruths, from which some other *you* could draw
odd inferences. Though I don't, I write
you, and you're the Donor on the right-
hand panel, kneeling in sable kirtle. Like-
ly I'm the lady left of you, who'd like
to peer into your missal, where the writ-
ing (legible Gothic) lauds in Latin poetry
the Lady at the center. Call her poetry,

virtual space, or Bona Dea. Poetry
dovetails contradictions. If I write
a private *you* a public discourse, words
tempered and stroked will draw you where you draw
these lines, and yours, convergent, made, unlike;

that likelihood draws words I write to poetry.

TAKING NOTICE

"two women together is a work
nothing in civilization has made simple"

Adrienne Rich: *XXI Love Poems*

1

My child wants dolls, a tutu, that girls' world made
pretty and facile. Sometimes. Sometimes I
want you around uncomplicatedly.
Work every day; love (the same one) every
night: old songs and new choir the parade
of coupled women whose fidelity
is a dyke icon. You are right: if we
came to new love and friendship with a sad
baggage of endings, we would come in bad
faith, and bring, rooted already, seed
of a splitting. Serial monogamy
is a cogwheeled hurt, though you don't like the word.
The neighbor's tireless radio sings lies
through the thin wall behind my desk and bed.

2

Morning: the phone jangles me from words: you,
working at his place, where you slept last night,
missed me. You'll bring drawings. I missed you too.
What centers, palpably swelling my tight
chest: lust, tenderness, an itch of tears.
Three Swedish Ivy rootlings get a pot.
Wash earth-crumbed hands, strip, put long underwear
on, tug, zip, buckle, tie, button, go out—
a mailbox full of bills and circulars.
I trust you: it's a knife-edge of surprise
through words I couldn't write down, subvocalize
across Eighty-First Street, cold as it was
at eight when I put Iva on the bus,
stalling through iced slush between frost-rimed cars.

3

When that jackbooted choreography
sends hobnailed cabrioles across a brain,
the stroked iron pulling lovers together pulls
them apart. Through the ecstatic reverie
of hands, eyes, mouths, our surfaces' silken
sparking, heraldic plants and animals
alive on our tender cartography,
the homesick victim glimpses the coast of pain,
hears the familiar argot of denial.
Woman I love, as old, as new to me
as any moment of delight risked in
my lumpy heretofore unbeautiful
skin, if I lost myself in you I'd be
no better lost than any other woman.

4

She twists scraps of her hair in unshelled snails
crossed by two hairpins. It takes forty-five
minutes. I'm twelve. I've come in to pee. I've
left *Amazing Stories* and *Weird Tales*
in the hamper. "Don't believe what you read.
Women who let men use them are worse than
whores. Men despise them. I can understand
prostitutes, never 'free love'." Not freed
to tell her what I thought of *More Than Human*,
I wipe between my mottled oversized
girl-haunches. I'll be one of the despised,
I know, as she forbids with her woman's
body, flaccid, gaunt in a greyed nightgown,
something more culpable for us than "men."

5

"I never will be only a Lesbian."

Bare rubber, wedged beside its tube of cream
in the bookshelf near your bed, your diaphragm
lies on Jane Cooper's poem and Gertrude Stein.
I've torn our warm cocoon again. I listen.
Our sweated breasts nuzzle under the quilt.
(Yes, there's one in my bathroom cabinet;
unused, now.) If a man sleeps with men, and women,
he's *queer*: *vide* Wilde, Goodman, Gide, Verlaine.
A woman who does can be "passionately
heterosexual" (said Norman Pearson of H.D.).
Anyone's love with women doesn't count.
Rhetoric, this. You talk about your friend.
I hold you, wanting whatever I want.

6

Angry, I speak, and pass the hurt to you,
 your pencil-smudged face naked like a child's.
 Each time we don't know what we're getting into
 or out of. Later, washed out and reconciled,
 we wait on the subway platform, Mutt and Jeff
 puffed out with football socks and Duofolds,
 word-shy, habitually bold enough
 to sit thigh against corduroy thigh and hold
 hands; though, ungendered in thick winter gear,
 only your cheek's epicene ivory
 makes us the same sex. No one looks healthy
 in the perpetual fluorescence. Here
 (you say) the light is the same night and day,
 but it feels like night at night anyway.

7

If we talk, we're too tired to make love; if we
 make love, these days, there's hardly time to talk.
 We sit to share supper once, twice a week.
 You're red and white with cold; we're brusque, scared,
 shy.

Difficult speech curdles the café au lait
 next morning. In the short twelve hours between
 we rubbed, laughed, tongued, exhorted, listened,
 came,
 slept like packed spoons. Wrapped up against the day
 we trudge through slush as far as the downtown
 subway, brush cold-tattered lips. You're gone
 to hunch sock-shod over your camera, while
 I stare a spiral notebook down six miles
 north, indulging some rich weave of weeks where
 we'd work, play, not cross-reference calendars.

8

The sitter, sniffing, leaves, clicks the door shut.
 Shuck boots; back from Womanbooks. Iva fights
 the quilt in her top bunk, in striped underwear.
 A painter read from six months journals, through
 learning she loved a woman, at forty-two.
 If you were here, we'd compare pasts, compare
 process to language, art; you're not, tonight.
 Back at the revolution all is not
 well. We, women, patient mockers of our own
 enterprise, are mined with self-destruction.
 We build what we need. We wreck what we build.
 I'm making coffee when the telephone
 rings: you, ducked into a booth across town?
 Another woman, friend, as risked, as real.

9

In my boots and blazer I feel like Julien Sorel.
 Should I bow from the waist, flourish my hand
 three rolls from crown to knee? No, I'm polite and
 verbose. Films; drinks; the meeting goes as well
 as it could, until five o'clock when he
 leaves, and I wax vehement over beer
 bottles. Look, baby, I *want* to be queer,
 it's the light at the other end of the
 long march, et cetera. Cut: a streamlined
 she-torso with no feet, no hands, no head;
 intercut penis/hammer; eye reads: blows:
 his filmed image of—you? Woman? Who knows
 (I don't) what's between you two. We spar down
 slicked streets to your stop; kiss. I walk downtown.

10

The grizzled doorman lets the doctors' wives
into and out of the rainstorm. Thirty-year-
old mothers hive here till their men's careers
regroup the swarm for boxed suburban lives.
The doorman's sixty, football-shouldered, white.
The multi-racial anoraked interns
will earn, per year, at forty, more than he earns
in ten. Maybe one-tenth of the scrubbed bright
wives will earn his wages; fewer do.
Knees dovetailed at The Duchess, I'm giving you
my hours with a talk-starved woman I knew there
through her tough small girl, while on the polished
square
at our boot-toes blue-jeaned women slow-dance
to a rhythmic alto plaint of ruined romance.

11

In the Public Theater lobby, I wait for Marie.
Black overcoat, brown plait: two people waltz
close, through the crowd's buzz. I watch, finding fault
with the dance's hierarchic He and She.
They weave past: Tall leads, Short follows. I see
they're women. I love them. I stand near
them, grin, wish I wore a lavender star.
Marie's here, blinking, owlish. We hug. We
go upstairs. The two women sit one row
ahead, kissing. I look at them, look away.
They are more edifying than the play
(will they laugh at woman-made misogyny?
Yes . . .) but I shouldn't stare, and when I do
I flush above the belt and throb below.

12

You're high on work, bouncing words off the ceiling
as we lie down, go down into a flurry of down,
arms and legs enlaced. My tongue around
your hillocks shudders your pleasure, feeling
its own rough touch call the blood-rush swelling
everything mutable to immanence.

We giggle at our fork-tongued eloquence,
gasp at our fingers' dazzling slide. You're telling
me about Wittgenstein and Gertrude Stein
images juxtaposed on a white wall
moving, the metaphysics of a meal
we shared, till we kiss ourselves to a wine-
drenched feast whose mute wit is a mutual
silence honed in our rapt mouths to a sign.

13

No better lost than any other woman
turned resolutely from the common pool
of our erased, emended history,
I think of water, in this book-strewn room. In
another room, my daughter, home from school,
audibly murmurs "spanking, stupid, angry
voice"—a closet drama where I am
played second-hand to unresisting doll
daughters. Mother and daughter both, I see
myself, the furious and unforgiven;
myself, the terrified and terrible;
the child punished into autonomy;
the unhealed woman hearing her own voice damn
her to the nightmares of the brooding girl.

14

And I shout at Iva, whine at you. Easily we choose up for nuclear family, with me the indirect, snivelling, put-upon mother/wife, child's villain, feminist heroine, bore. On thick white plates the failed communion congeals. Iva bawls in her room. You're on edge, worked out, fed up, could leave. Shakily we stop. You wash dishes, drop one; it breaks. We should laugh. We don't. A potted plant crashed too. Frowning, I salvage the crushed shoots, while you deflect my scowl with yours. You leave a phone message for your friend, while I read one last picture book, permit a bedtime drink to a nude child, who's forgiven me—I think.

15

Through wet August nights we were the revolution crawling forward on each other's bellies. Our anecdotes about our mothers told what would be foible, what unforgivable. Twenty-seven, thirty-six, five, we three amble, howl at the March full moon over housing projects. Iva hangs on our elbows. "Drag me!" Our tensed arms heft live weight, grubby and kicking. Your tired pale face shifts in the moon-pool: a farm woman, a raw boy, a red-lipped hedonist. Night slims down, warms up towards our third season.

I lean above my unkempt child toward all of them. She tugs us, "*I hate to be kissed!*"

16

Dreams play diverse cadenzas of betrayal.
I wake word-foundered. Anything I say
discovers discord. Chin to squared-off chin,
crossed arms, I worry you, "How do you feel?"
"Anxious. I feel cut off and far away."
You and I have done, will do this again:
one querulous; response: one inflexible.
I A-train uptown through the ordinary
assaults. MEN STONE FEM LIBBERS IN IRAN.
Childless, anonymous, accountable,
I gauge how wide apart to stake my knees.
Most of the faces facing me are brown.
None of the choices facing me are simple.
I can't, today, begin a sentence "We . . ."

17

I hold you, wanting whatever I want:
to taste cold water; to get up and pee;
to fuck; to know there might be space named "we"
to build on. I tend to the first two, can't
have all. You're asleep. Still in underpants,
I wash the percolator out, start coffee,
write, cross out, write more. Anxiety
shifts through the placed words' patterns, takes
distance
enough that when you say my name, I lie
with you, loosened, in your waking fragrance:
soaped hair, warm bread of your skin, exhaled mint.
My eyes encounter your lacustrine eyes,
where you might, I might, miscall lust, clarity,
and I hook my tongue on something like a sentence.

18

I'll tell you what I don't want: an affair:
love, by appointment only, twice a week;
grimy, gratuitous life lived elsewhere
with others. When it's easier to speak
about than to you, when I think of you
more than I'm with you, more anxious than tender,
I feel less than a friend. There's work to do.
Artist, woman, I love you; craft and gender,
if we're antagonists, aren't in dispute.
Love starts with circumstance; it grows with care
to something self-sufficient, centered, root
from which the cultivators branch, the air
renewing them transpired rich from its pores.
Or so I hoped while I was celibate.

19

When I read poems to the art students
I wanted you there; when my ephebes, shar-
ing craft I taught, showed off, I wanted you there;
when I talk a woman around imprudence,
when I orchestrate a meeting or a meal,
when my thoughts unroll imaginal sentences,
when I come through better than I thought I was,
I want you there. But I surface seasick, feel
desire and apprehension lashed like stones
to me. Reeled toward you in the elevator,
I shrink inches from my accomplished stature
of thoughtful hero, whom you haven't seen,
diminishing to needy lover, green
with doubt and necessarily alone.

20

You separate perception from perceiver;
I make it sound like virtue that I can't.

In this imaginary argument

we've had repeatedly when we're together,
my mind is limbic, weighted like the weather.
You're sunlit on another continent.

It's rained five days here. The first two I spent
indoors, ate cheese, read magazines, neither
nourished nor informed. My anger paired
with your absence: lonely parameters.

I want to be the child-philosopher
cross-legged in the drop-leaf table's shelter;
bare legs crossed on the nubbly pile, who felt her
mind's flux find form in fixed faces of chairs.

21

Down from the hills at dawn, a thunderstorm
pounded the cabin roof. Indoors, I rolled
to the wall, a log quilted against spring cold,
and wove the noise into a ravelling dream
whose threads snapped into syllables Marie
was muttering from the upper bunk in clear
incoherence. You're not here. Iva's not here.

We sat on the porch late, in luxury
of rambling childless conversation, ate
a steak cooked on the camp stove, with Bordeaux
from New Paltz, talked more, turned in. Candlelit
again, impatient and disconsolate,
I wait afternoon rains out, rummage through
scrap thoughts while Marie writes, stalled, missing
you.

22

The late-May weather's risky as a mood.
Yesterday's freighted clouds have burned away
leaving scoured sky, mud, sunlight, solitude
I frame in tin cups of thermos coffee
back on the porch with Marie. Heliotrope,
I lodge, knees up in weeds, on a gravelled slope
where tall white pines light candles for the summer.
On my knapsack strap, a V-winged bomber
modelled from a scarab perches on moon-
jitney legs, a horsefly numbed with noon
sun. I've learned to pick out a late wood-
thrush song enlacing the percussive jays.
This respite from inclement weather could
(clouds are banking up, though) last through the day.

23

As yoked to her by absence as by presence,
I image, fifteen minutes since she's gone,
her sneakers pushing leaves up as she ran
into the woods, urged on to independence
by me. Feet on the porch rail, I drink silence,
thinking: She has to cross the road alone.
If she doesn't find anyone at home
—the six-year-old gone shopping with his parents—
will she get panicky and lose her way?
Revenant, you nap. Marie drove to town.
I look up from my book, identify
the she-cardinal's sanguine rose-brown,
then check my watch. From down the path comes
"Hey,
Mom!" Forty-five minutes on my own.

24

Strata of August 12: portable typewriter,
seashell ashtray, blue-and-white plastic lighter,
a jagged ochre flint from the Val d'Oise,
two amber quartz flakes, two packs of Gauloises,
tan spiral notebook, brown spiral address
book, a friend's typed essay on loneliness,
her card from Russian River, a map of France,
a blank postcard of market day in Vence,
four letters in four colored envelopes,
typing pad, cold coffee in a glass cup,
airmail envelopes in a paper band,
two felt pens, one capped, one in a beige hand,
writing, straw mat, glossy black paint that pulls
the eye on reflected light to the facing hills.

25

We work, play, don't cross-reference calendars
here. Sun gilds a scrub-oak hill; the fig tree
drops purple dry first fruit on the cement
terrace that's, for the rest of August, ours,
where you project perspectives, blond head bent
to big papers. I chart stratigraphy
of my desk, glimpse, in a pitcher, flowers
you brought, for our year, though we're both diffident
to celebrate. I start letters, can't write
what it's like, face to face, learning to live
through four A.M. eruptions, when we fight
like bruised children we were. Can I believe
persistent love demands change, not forgive-
ness, accept the hard gift of your different sight?

from **ASSUMPTIONS**

GRAFFITI FROM THE GARE SAINT-MANQUÉ

for Zed Bee

Outside the vineyard is a caravan
of Germans taking pictures in the rain.
The local cheese is Brillat-Savarin.
The best white wine is Savigny-les-Beaune.
We learn Burgundies while we have the chance
and lie down under cabbage-rose wallpaper.
It's too much wine and brandy, but I'll taper
off later. Who is watering my plants?
I may go home as wide as Gertrude Stein
—another Jewish Lesbian in France.

Around the sculptured Dukes of Burgundy,
androgynous monastics, faces cowed,
thrust bellies out in marble ecstasy
like child swimmers having their pigtails towed.
Kids sang last night. A frieze of celebrants
circles the tomb, though students are in school,
while May rain drizzles on the beautiful
headlines confirming François Mitterand's
election. We have Reagan. Why not be
another Jewish Lesbian in France?

Aspiring Heads of State are literate
here, have favorite poets, can explain
the way structuralists obliterate
a text. They read at night. They're still all men.
Now poppy-studded meadows of Provence
blazon beyond our red sardine-can car.
We hope chairpersons never ask: why are
unblushing deviants abroad on grants?
My project budget listed: Entertain
another Jewish Lesbian in France.

I meant my pithy British village neighbor
who misses old days when sorority
members could always know each other: they wore
short-back-and-sides and a collar and tie.
She did, too. Slavic eyes, all romance
beneath an Eton crop with brilliantined
finger-waves, photographed at seventeen
in a dark blazer and a four-in-hand:
a glimpse of salad days that made the day for
another Jewish Lesbian in France.

Then we went on to peanuts and Campari,
she and her friend, my friend and I, and then
somehow it was nine-thirty and a hurry
to car and *carte* and a carafe of wine,
Lapin Sauté or Truite Meunière in Vence.
Convivial quartet of friends and lovers:
had anyone here dreaded any other's
tears, dawn recriminations and demands?
Emphatically not. That must have been
another Jewish Lesbian in France.

It's hard to be almost invisible.
You think you must be almost perfect too.
When your community's not sizeable,
it's often a community of two,
and a dissent between communicants
is a commuter pass to the abyss.
Authorities who claim you don't exist
would sometimes find you easy to convince.
(It helps if you can talk about it to
another Jewish Lesbian in France.)

A decorated she-Academician
opines we were thought up by horny males.
No woman of equivalent position
has yet taken the wind out of her sails.
(How would her "lifelong companion" have thanked
her?)

Man loving Man's *her* subject, without mention
if what they do is due to her invention
—and if I'd been her mother, I'd have spanked her.
(Perhaps in a suppressed draft *Hadrian's*
another Jewish Lesbian in France.)

Then the advocates of Feminitude
—with dashes as their only punctuation—
explain that Reason is to be eschewed:
In the Female Subconscious lies salvation.
Suspiciously like Girlish Ignorance,
it seems a rather watery solution.
If I can't dance, it's not my revolution.
If I can't think about it, I won't dance.
So let the ranks of *Psych et Po* include
another Jewish Lesbian in France.

I wish I had been packed off to the nuns
to learn good manners, Attic Greek, and Latin.
(No public Bronx Junior High School fit all that in.)
My angsts could have been casuistic ones.
It's not my feminist inheritance
to eat roots, drink leaf broth, live in a cave,
and not even know how to misbehave
with just one vowel and five consonants.
This patchwork autodidact Anglophone's
another Jewish Lesbian in France,

following Natalie Barney, Alice B.
Toklas, Djuna Barnes, generous Bryher,
Romaine Brooks, Sylvia Beach, H.D.,
Tamara de Lempicka, Janet Flanner.
They made the best use of the circumstance
that blood and stockings often both were bluish;
(they all were white, and only Alice Jewish)
wicked sept / oct / nonagenarians.
Would it have saved Simone Weil's life to be
another Jewish Lesbian in France?

It isn't sex I mean. Sex doesn't save
anyone, except, sometimes, from boredom
(and the underpaid under-class of whoredom
is often bored at work). I have a grave
suspicion ridicule of Continence
or Chastity is one way to disparage
a woman's choice of any job but marriage.
Most of us understand what we renounce.
(This was a lunchtime peptalk I once gave
another Jewish Lesbian in France

depressed by temporary solitude
but thinking coupled bliss was dubious.)
I mean: one way to love a body viewed
as soiled and soiling existential dross
is knowing through your own experience
a like body embodying a soul
to be admirable and loveable.
That is a source that merits nourishment.
Last night despair dressed as self-loathing wooed
another Jewish Lesbian in France.

The sheet was too soft. Unwashed for three weeks,
it smelled like both of us. The sin we are
beset by is despair. I rubbed my cheeks
against the cotton, thought, I wouldn't care
if it were just *my* funk. Despair expands
to fill . . . I willed my arm: extend; hand: stroke
that sullen shoulder. In the time it took
synapse to realize abstract commands,
the shoulder's owner fell asleep. Still there
another Jewish Lesbian in France

stared at the sickle moon above the skylight,
brooding, equally sullen, that alone
is better after all. As close as my right
foot, even my bed stops being my own.
Could I go downstairs quietly, make plans
for myself, not wake her? Who didn't undress,

slept on the couch bundled with loneliness
rather than brave that nuptial expanse
five weeks before. Another contradiction
another Jewish Lesbian in France

may reconcile more gracefully than I.
We're ill-equipped to be obliging wives.
The post office and travel agency
are significant others in our lives.
Last summer I left flowers at Saint Anne's
shrine. She had daughters. One who, legends tell,
adrift, woman-companioned, shored (is still
revered) in the Camargue, her holy band's
navigatrix, Mary, calming the sea
—another Jewish Lesbian in France?

It says they lived together forty years,
Mary and Mary and Sarah (who was black).
Unsaintly ordinary female queers,
we packed up and went separately back.
We'd shared the road with gypsy sleeper vans
to join Sarah's procession to the shore.
Our own month-end anabasis was more
ambiguous. Among Americans
my polyglot persona disappears,
another Jewish Lesbian in France.

Coeur mis à nu in sunlight, khaki pants
I've rolled up in a beach towel so ants
and crickets from the leafage won't invade
their sweaty legs: in a loaned hermit-glade
pine-redolent of New Hampshire, not France,
I disentangle from the snares I laid.
Liver-lobed mushrooms thicken in the shade,
shrubs unwrap, pinelings thrust through mulch. Noon
 slants
across my book, my chest, its lemonade
rays sticky as a seven-year-old's hands.

FIFTEEN TO EIGHTEEN

I'd almost know, the nights I snuck in late,
at two, at three, as soon as I had tucked
into myself tucked in, to masturbate
and make happen what hadn't when I fucked,
there'd be the gargled cry, always "God damn
you to hell," to start with, from the other
bedroom: she was in shock again. I swam
to my surface to take care of my mother.
That meant, run for a glass of orange juice,
clamp her shoulders with one arm, try to pour
it down her throat while she screamed, "No, God

damn

you!" She is stronger than I am
when this happens. If she rolls off on the floor,
I can't / she won't let me / lift her up. Fructose
solution, a shot and she'd come around.
At half-past-two, what doctor could I call?
Sometimes I had to call the hospital.
More often, enough orange juice got down,
splashed on us both.

"What are you doing here?

Where were you? Why is my bed in this mess?
How did you get those scratches on your face?
What were you doing, out until this hour?"

MOTHER II

No one is "Woman" to another
woman, except her mother.
Her breasts were unmysterious
naked: limp, small. But I thought pus
must ooze from them: her underwear
like bandages. Blood came from where
I came from, stanchd with pads between
her legs, under the girdle, seen
through gaping bathroom doors. Around
her waist, all sorts of rubber. Bound
to stop the milk, my milk, her breasts
stayed flat. I watched my round self, guessed
a future where I'd droop and leak.
But dry and cool against her cheek
I'd lean my cheek. I stroked the lace
and serge she sheathed her carapace
with: straight skirts, close cuffs, full sleeves;
was, wordless, catechized; believed:
nude, she was gaunt; dressed, she was slim;
nude, she was flabby; dressed, her firm
body matched her brisk, precise
mid-continental teacher's voice,
which she had molded, dry, perfect-
ed from a swamp of dialect.
Naked or clad, for me, she wore
her gender, perpetual *chador*,

her individual complex
history curtained off by sex.
Child, I determined that I would
not be subsumed in womanhood.
Whatever she was, I was not.
Whoever she was, I forgot
to ask, and she forgot to tell,
muffled in costumes she as well
rejected as a girl, resumed
—on my account? Are women doomed,
beasts that repeat ourselves, to rage
in youth against our own old age,
in age to circumscribe our youth
with self-despise dressed as truth?
Am I "Woman" to my water-
dwelling brown loquacious daughter,
corporeal exemplar of
her thirst for what she would not love?

AUTUMN 1980

for Judith McDaniel

I spent the night after my mother died
in a farmhouse north of Saratoga Springs
belonging to a thirty-nine-year-old
professor with long, silvered wiry hair,
a lively girl's flushed cheeks and gemstone eyes.
I didn't know that she had died.

Two big bitches and a varying
heap of cats snoozed near a black wood stove
on a rag rug, while, on the spring-shot couch
we talked late over slow glasses of wine.
In the spare room near Saratoga Springs
was a high box bed. My mother died
that morning, of heart failure, finally.
Insulin shocks burned out her memory.
On the bed, a blue early-century
Texas Star, in a room white and blue
as my flannel pajamas. I'd have worn
the same, but smaller, ten years old at home.
Home was the Bronx, on Eastburn Avenue,
miles south of the hermetic not-quite-new
block where they'd sent this morning's ambulance.
Her nurse had telephoned. My coat was on,
my book-stuffed bag already on my back.
She said, "Your mother had another shock.
We'll be taking her to the hospital."
I asked if I should stay. She said, "It's all
right." I named the upstate college where

I'd speak that night. This had happened before.
I knew / I didn't know: it's not the same.
November cold was in that corner room
upstairs, with a frame window over land
the woman and another woman owned
—who was away. I thought of her alone
in her wide old bed, me in mine. I turned
the covers back. I didn't know she had died.
The tan dog chased cats; she had to be tied
in the front yard while I went along
on morning errands until, back in town,
I'd catch my bus. November hills were raw
fall after celebratory fall
foliage, reunions, festival.
I blew warmth on my hands in a dark barn
where two shaggy mares whuffed in straw,
dipped steaming velvet muzzles to the pail
of feed. We'd left the pickup's heater on.
It smelled like kapok when we climbed inside.
We both unzipped our parkas for the ride
back to the Saratoga bus station.
I blamed the wind if I felt something wrong.
A shrunken-souled old woman whom I saw
once a month lay on a hospital
slab in the Bronx. Mean or not, that soul
in its cortège of history was gone.
I didn't know that I could never know,